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Challenges of Learning in Second Language among South African School Learners with Developmental Language Disorder

Abstract

Language in education plays a critical role in effective teaching and learning worldwide. This study aimed to explore the challenges of learning in a second language among secondary school learners with developmental language disorder (DLD). The study also unveils strategies used by professionals to support learners and learners' attitudes towards support. The study participants were learners ($n = 12$), teachers ($n = 5$), a speech Language therapist, and an educational psychologist. A qualitative research approach was utilised employing a case study as the research design. Data generation sources included non-participatory observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that learning in a second language as the medium of instruction posed challenges for learners with DLD. They struggled with comprehension, reading, and word recognition of learning content. Teachers indicated that they used strategies such as remedial lessons and giving learners more reading material to enhance their vocabulary and narrative skills. They also referred learners to other professionals for further assistance. Parental involvement is also encouraged in support of learners. However, one of the factors limiting learners' support is learners' attitudes. Learners' attitudes towards support may be attributed to limited awareness of DLD. Hence, there is a need to raise awareness of DLD among the learners. An in-depth course on special education in secondary teacher training programmes is necessary to further equip teachers with strategies to enhance inclusive classrooms. The promotion of local languages as a medium of instruction must be highly prioritised, even at a secondary level of education.

Keywords: developmental language disorder, second language learning, medium of instruction, learning challenges, home language

Success in school learning depends heavily on learners' ability to understand language use as a medium of instruction. Language in education plays a key role in effective teaching and learning worldwide (Khudsen, 2012). In post-apartheid South Africa, English has become the preferred medium of instruction in schools (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014). After 1994, the South African government embarked on a series of incisive efforts to shape language policy in education.

All eleven South African languages were given equal status in the South African constitution in which South African learners have the choice of being taught in their first language. However, due to limited resources and minimal oversight by the government, South African school teachers are not enthusiastic about tutoring in African languages (Hazeltine, 2013). Moreover, there are cases where teachers and learners code-switch and code-mix English with a local language during teaching and learning process. For instance, a study conducted in Limpopo showed that teachers use code-switching and a trans-language process, alternating and merging languages to assist learners to understand concepts (Kretzer, 2019).

In most South African schools, learners are required to learn and use vocabulary in a second language (Ossai & Uzoegwu, 2019). In such circumstances, learners with DLD may have difficulty developing cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). DLD is a neuro-developmental condition that impairs spoken or written language and is not associated with any known causal condition (McGregor et al., 2020). Learners with this condition struggle to learn, comprehend, and use spoken and written language (McGregory, 2020; Gillespie, 2015). Hence, using a second language as a medium of instruction may worsen communication challenges (Starling et al., 2011).

Communication difficulties substantially impact learners' academic progress and educational attainment (Tribushinina et al., 2020). Ngulube (2015) noted that such learners acquire language structures of English but find it hard to put them into understandable texts. In the same vein, Cakiroglu (2019) also highlighted that it is difficult for learners to acquire English as a second language because they lack comprehensible input to facilitate understanding.

Reading as a receptive skill assists learners in accumulating vocabulary; however, lack of it makes learners fail to infer meaning from texts (Cakiroglu, 2019). Manyike and Lemmer (2014) also argued that due to the use of English as the medium of instruction in South Africa, low academic achievement among black learners is revealed in the annual national school-leaving tests and annual literacy and numeracy assessments. Consequently, learners may develop negative attitudes towards using a second language as the medium of instruction and may not be able to participate effectively in classroom activities (Blair et al., 2018).

Krashen (1988), in his second language development theory, highlighted two independent systems of second language development, that is, acquired and learned systems. The acquired system is the result of meaningful interac-

tion using the target language. The process is similar to when children acquire their first language. The learned system is the product of formal instruction. It results in a child's knowledge of the language (e.g., grammar rules). The difference between the two systems is that the acquired system is the product of a subconscious process, while the learned system results from a conscious process (Krashen, 1988). Krashen (1988) added that Second Language Learning (SLL) does not facilitate Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

The learned system is generally used today in most schools where attention is focused on using the English language and its written form. The main objective for the learner is to understand the structure and rules of the language. Schütz (2007) argues that such a task requires intellectual effort and deductive reasoning, which a learner with DLD may struggle to attain.

Due to less knowledge and paucity of literature on challenges faced by South African school learners with DLD in learning a second language as an MOI, the individual specialised needs of South African learners with such a condition are not being adequately catered for in the mainstream classrooms (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014). Although evidence of support strategies for addressing barriers to learning exists (Adewoye, 2022), there are limited empirical findings on the challenges that a second language as a medium of instruction poses for effective teaching and learning among South African learners with DLD.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of learning in second language among South African school learners with DLD to propose effective instructional communication strategies suitable for implementation within the South African context.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question:

- What are the challenges of learning in second language among secondary school learners with DLD?

Methodological Designs

Research Approach and Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach. According to Basit (2010), qualitative research methods are suited for studies that seek to derive findings from participants' views. We used case studies to investigate real-life situations over time by collecting detailed, in-depth data from differ-

ent sources (Creswell, 2014). Two cases were purposively selected: Zimbabwe (Case 1) and South Africa (Case 2). However, this study reports the findings in South Africa (Case 2). Multiple case studies provided rich descriptions and interpretations on the phenomena under study and the replication of data collection across multiple sites helped to understand the challenges faced by learners with DLD in learning through a second language in different contexts.

Participants and Sampling Strategies

The inclusion criterion was based on the aim of gathering evidence from participants. Three schools in Gauteng were purposively chosen to participate in the study. This decision was made because of our familiarity with the area. Twenty participants, including 12 learners (six boys and six girls), six teachers, a speech-language therapist and an educational psychologist, were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The learners participating in this study were in Grades 7 and 8. They were between the ages of 13 and 15.

English language teachers were asked to select learners with mild DLD in their respective schools. The teachers selected the participants based on their familiarity and understanding of the language challenges of the participants. The research design dictated the number and type of participants; as a qualitative study, the goal was to elicit in-depth perspectives of the participants on the challenges of learning in second language among learners with DLD.

Data Collection Techniques

In this study, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and focus group discussions were used to collect data. Classroom observations were conducted in both schools. Focus group discussions were conducted with learners who were purposively selected by their respective teachers. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the teachers, speech-language therapists, and an educational psychologist. Telephone interviews were used for member checking during data analysis.

Driscoll (2011) purports that the core advantage of mixing different research techniques is that since each method has strengths and weaknesses, one technique can cover the weaknesses of the other. Therefore, the concept of triangulation was highly utilised in this study. Triangulation is used to determine how different methods check, validate, or collaborate one another. This enables an understanding of a social phenomenon from different viewpoints (Rich-Mahadkar, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics clearance from the author's institution was obtained. Permission to conduct research in Gauteng, South Africa, was granted by the Gauteng Department of Education. Throughout the study, informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary involvement were all incorporated.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. The procedure involved searching across data sets to identify, describe, and interpret data, and analyse and report repeated patterns (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), inductive thematic analysis is a common method of qualitative research analysis to identify, investigate, and record patterns in data. We coded the data to identify and build significant patterns. This includes: (a) getting familiar with the data, (b) creating initial codes, (c) looking for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and labelling the themes, and (f) writing up the findings.

Reliability of the Study

To ensure the credibility of the research findings, we prolonged the engagement with participants and triangulated data sources. Space triangulation was also used to overcome parochialism (Cohen et al., 2011). Also, transcribed data was emailed to the participants for verification (Gunawan, 2015).

Findings

The outcomes of the data analysis were recorded and categorised into three themes. These themes were sub-divided into eight sub-themes. In this article, we discuss sub-themes on the challenges faced by learners with DLD in using a second language as the medium of instruction. We also investigated learner attitudes towards support strategies as one of the factors affecting the effective implementation of support by professionals.

Difficulty in Comprehension

Learners highlighted the challenges they faced learning with a second language, English. They mentioned that understanding instructions given in English was a challenge; for instance, one of the participants stated:

Most times I don't understand instructions when the teacher is instructing me using English language. (P4)

Teachers indicated that learners with DLD demonstrate little comprehension of topics taught because it is difficult for them to interpret and respond to questions appropriately. According to the teachers, such learners frequently concentrate on important words while ignoring the rest of the text, which affects their comprehension of the questions. A teacher stated:

I realised when I use English throughout the lesson without the use of any vernacular language, learners with DLD are left behind. They show little comprehension of the lesson taught. (P3)

Other teachers shared a similar view that using a second language as the medium of instruction negatively affected learners with DLD academically. The use of a second language as the medium of instruction affects learners' performance in classroom activities. A teacher shared the following thoughts:

Yes, it does affect their academic performance because they find it difficult to comprehend what they are being taught when using [a] second language. Eventually, it affects their performances in tests and exams. (P7)

The Speech Language therapist mentioned that using English as the medium of instruction affects learners with DLD. This is because they struggled to acquire language at an appropriate level of proficiency. She further explained:

Well, we are looking at children with DLD, but the language of instruction is English, right? We are already burdening a child who has a burden, right? We are bringing in this foreign language which to them is difficult, yet they are struggling with their own local language. Hence, we have a very serious problem. (P1)

As a result of their difficulties in comprehension, learners with developmental language disorders perform poorly in all learning areas. One of the learners declared:

I struggle to read and interpret word sums in Mathematics; I cannot comprehend and interpret what the questions are, especially in Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. (P6)

Difficulty in Reading

During the classroom observation in schools, we noticed that learners with DLD experienced difficulties reading texts. Some of these learners were passive. They could not contribute to anything during the class activities. Most learners feel too embarrassed to participate during lessons because of the fear of being laughed at. To substantiate this observation, a teacher stated thus:

The use of [a] second language as the medium of instruction negatively affects these learners in reading, and they become very passive during lessons to avoid embarrassment. Most [of the] time, they fail to participate in class activities because they can't read in English. They withdraw from learning. They just keep quiet in the classroom because of fear of embarrassment (P18)

When asked why learners with DLD find reading English text difficult, an educational psychologist explained that:

The use of a second language as the medium of instruction kind of put a learner with a language disorder at further disadvantage because they are already disadvantaged by their condition. The use of English as the medium of instruction makes matters worse for such learners because they already struggle acquiring their local language at [an] appropriate level of proficiency. (P5)

Learners must be able to answer questions requiring them to read instructions, explain, suggest, solve, discuss, analyse, comprehend, and justify aspects of the work to succeed in school. However, learners with DLD experience difficulties with their reading tasks. Their grammatical and textual competency is limited, contributing to their anxiety in class. As a result of limited vocabulary, they are unable to construct logical phrases and paragraphs to compose meaningful text.

The same question was posed to a teacher who answered thus:

Learners with developmental language disorder do not like reading tasks because they sometimes read without understanding and fail to answer the comprehension test questions. As a result, they often perform poorly in their assessment tasks, which make[s] them feel inferior to their peers. (P8)

Difficulty in Word Recognition

Almost all the teachers indicated that most learners with DLD have trouble with word recognition. Their inability to recognise or use words correctly leads to poor performance. The excerpts that follow illustrate the challenges that difficulty in word recognition posed for such learners.

A lack of vocabulary forces them to produce work of poor quality as they cannot do as well as their peers. They do not understand idioms, proverbs, and expressions. (P3)

Difficulty in recognising words while reading confuses the learners. The learners face various challenges, such as word problems, comprehension problems, as well as problems in creative writing activities. They scored poorly in tests and examinations owing to poor writing quality and an inability to interpret questions appropriately. One teacher buttressed this point by saying:

They lack the skills to recognise and pronounce important words in a sentence. If they cannot pronounce such words, the learners would just omit them without making any further attempts to complete the task. In addition, the learners struggle to pronounce words correctly. They mix vowel sounds such as *a*, *e*, and *i*. As a result, they end up guessing where to place the stress and subsequently read words incorrectly. (P4)

Learners were also asked to narrate their experiences regarding being taught in school with a second language to shed more light on this. One learner stated:

I don't like being taught with English language because the words are confusing, I don't always understand what is required of me. I find it very difficult to interpret sentence[s], when I try, others laugh at me. (P2)

Using the English language for practical purposes is a significant challenge for learners with a developmental language disorder. They failed to ask questions in class and write paragraphs in English because they have difficulty understanding, reading, and recognising words, as well as spelling and sentence construction. On some occasions, they knew and understood tasks, but their grammatical deficiencies made it difficult to write sentences appropriately, affecting their academic performance in all learning areas. They reportedly struggled to write down their ideas properly.

Learners' Attitudes towards Support

Despite challenges highlighted by the learners, the teachers argued that there are support systems to assist such learners (see Table 1).

Table 1

Support Systems for Learners with DLD

Participants	Support system for Learners with DLD
P18	Giving learners more books to read, Remedial lessons, More parental involvement, Referrals to the District-Based Support Team (DBST).
P19	Remedial lessons, Giving learners more books to read.
P20	Remedial lessons, Availability of more books for learners to read, Referring learners to DBST.

However, one of the factors impeding the effective implementation of these strategies is the learners' attitude towards support. One of the teachers highlighted that such learners do not cooperate; most of them are aggressive and uncontrollable. She also added that it was difficult to monitor them as the classes were too big:

They are many learners who are not supposed to be here, honestly. They are supposed to be doing vocational subjects. Because of their language disorder, they become so embarrassed. Some become uncontrollable, rude, and aggressive sometimes. They hide out because our classes are just too big. (P4)

Furthermore, one learner confirmed that he had challenges in understanding English as the medium of instruction, but he could not disclose it to his teacher.

I honestly lose focus in class [laughs]. I do have challenges in understanding lessons taught in English, I am not open, so my teachers will be thinking I am okay while not okay. [I] am not that open, you know. (P9)

Some learners also highlighted that they avoided contributing in class because the other learners would laugh at them:

I cannot participate in class. Some students always laugh when I miss the correct answer. If you spell the word wrong, they laugh in class, so I will be ashamed, you know. So, it is best to keep your cool in class, you know. (P10)

Learners' attitudes also affect the referral process; teachers cannot refer learners for further support to the speech-language therapist as they try to hide their condition. This explains why very few learners are referred to speech-language therapists at the secondary level of education. The speech-language therapist argued that she received referrals mostly from the primary level compared to the secondary level. This means that many unidentified learners with DLD in the mainstream classrooms are not receiving support from professionals.

Discussion

Ability to communicate is a fundamental skill required for effective participation in school activities. Learners with DLD are facing significant language difficulties (Ziegenfusz et al., 2022), especially in education contexts where the second language is used as the medium of instruction. This study's findings revealed that using a second language as the medium of instruction posed challenges for learners with DLD. Learners experienced difficulties in comprehension, reading, and word recognition. Teachers reported that learners with DLD mispronounced words and did not fully comprehend text. Hence, they hardly understand the lessons being taught.

Existing literature is replete with the challenges of using a second language as the general medium of instruction for learners. Studies by Khan and Khan (2016), Krugel and Fourie (2014), Nawaz et al. (2015), Ngulube (2015), as well as Cakiroglu (2019) have concluded that the use of a second language as the medium of instruction also contributes to poor academic achievement of learners. In Australia, O'Connor et al. (2015) concluded that learners who entered school were not yet proficient in English, were at risk of experiencing low education outcomes. In Tanzania, Lupogo (2014) concluded that using a second language in vocational education training was a disadvantage because most students failed to understand the language of instruction. The findings of this study also resonate with those of Vuzo (2018), who argued that using a second language in Tanzania contributed to school dropout because using unfamiliar language as a medium of instruction contributes to learners' lack of interest in learning.

The presence of language difficulties has a significant impact on the academic success and educational attainment of learners with DLD. Such learners often function at the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) level and do not develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Lillywhite, 2011). Academic language skills include inferential language, that is, communicating ideas across contexts and using a narrative language where learners are expected to describe a series of events and understand the range of academic vocabulary and grammatical structures (Wissel, 2016). It is, therefore, not surprising that such learners are in dire situations in terms of poor academic achievement (Tuite, 2019). Thus, considering the nature and characteristics of developmental language disorders, support is necessary to include and accommodate such learners in school.

Inclusive education refers to a wide range of strategies and processes that seek to make the universal right to quality, relevant, and appropriate education a reality. "It is about changing the system to fit the student, not changing the student to fit the system. It locates the 'problem' of exclusion firmly within the system, not the person or their characteristics" (Stubbs, 2008, p. 8). Therefore, the education system must have supportive structures and services to support the needs of all learners.

Teachers reported that they do support learners with DLD. They gave them more books to read and conducted remedial lessons. These strategies enhanced learners' vocabulary and narrative skills (Joffe et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2017; Lowe & Joffe, 2017; Spencer et al., 2017). The teachers also explained that they encouraged more parental involvement during support. In some cases, they referred such learners to the District-Based Support Team for further assistance and support. However, learners' attitudes towards support affect accurate identification and effective support.

Although the findings of this study indicated that learners struggled with reading, comprehension, and word recognition, they had developed compensatory strategies to hide their challenges. They resorted to compensatory strategies such as absenteeism, not responding to questions, avoiding oral presentations, and not attending lessons. This made it very difficult for their teachers to identify and support them. The National Behaviour Support Service [NBSS] (2011) highlighted that many learners with DLD may have an undetected or hidden difficulty with language acquisition because they often develop compensatory strategies, for example, always agreeing or disagreeing with the conversational partner, remaining silent or responding using learned phrases or being absent.

There is a stigma attached to being given support among learners with DLD in mainstream secondary school. Support is viewed as a punishment and an embarrassment. Such learners have low self-esteem and lack confidence. A lack of confidence emanates from the labels attached to the learners (Miller, 2019). Such learners experience a variety of difficulties, socially and emotionally.

Social withdrawal has been a particular concern for such learners, particularly reticent withdrawal, or shyness in a school setting (Miller, 2019). Miller (2019) added that learners' social withdrawal patterns co-occur with poor social outcomes, such as difficulties in establishing friendships, social isolation, and victimisation. Raines et al. (2012) argue that learners with special needs such as DLD may suffer social isolation, lower self-esteem, substandard education, and are twice as likely to drop out of school.

There is limited awareness of the importance of speech-language communication needs by teachers, general school staff, and the community. This shortcoming is because there is an assumption that language development and early intervention only happen early in the primary years and not in secondary school. There is a narrow understanding of the role of language in the secondary school curriculum. Hence, fewer professionals have the skills, knowledge, resources, and assessment tools to identify or support learners with DLD on time. So, learners are labelled "dull" with "deviant behaviour" and just fall through the system's cracks.

Furthermore, education training for teachers in mainstream classrooms rarely prepares teachers for working in diverse classrooms, and it does not equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to support learners with DLD effectively (Krystal, 2015; Zwane & Malale, 2018). Handling learners with special needs requires extensive expertise. Also, parenting children with challenges such as DLD requires a high level of knowledge and access to resources, information and services. In developing countries such as South Africa, such services are not always available to every learner with DLD challenges (Taderera & Hall, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study contributes to the literature on the challenges that learners with DLD face in secondary schools. Tribushinina et al. (2020) noted that there is limited literature on the challenges of using second language as a medium of instruction for such learners. Therefore, this study explored the challenges such learners face in secondary school where second language is used as a medium of instruction. These challenges affect learners in all learning areas and overall academic performance. By using a qualitative research approach, professionals and learners could provide detailed descriptions of their experiences on the topic under study, which would have been limited if a quantitative approach had been utilised.

In-depth courses on special education in secondary teacher training programs are necessary to equip teachers with knowledge of inclusive education.

Interprofessional collaboration is recommended, especially between teachers and speech-language therapists. This will ensure effective support of learners with DLD. Professionals will share their knowledge and expertise, and this will enhance the support of the learners in mainstream schools. Assessment tests used to identify and support learners with DLD must be relevant to learners in multilingual contexts.

There is a need for a paradigm shift in the way the second language is used and taught in schools. Krashen's language acquisition and learning systems must be used to cater to all learners' needs. The medium of instruction must be inclusive to accommodate the needs of learners with language acquisition challenges, such as learners with developmental language disorders. Raju and Joshith (2018) argued that learners need to get a wide variety of language inputs for better acquisition through reading books, having conversations, and listening to the target language. The teachers are responsible for ensuring that the materials and tasks they use in their classrooms are organised and implemented to meet individual learner's needs (Ivančević-Otanjac, 2016).

The promotion of local languages must be highly prioritised, even in secondary school. Literacy in local languages must be developed beyond the decoding of narrative texts. Learners with developmental language disorder should therefore be given a chance to develop their first language fully, then they should gradually be introduced to the second language. The learner should acquire BICS and CALP in their local languages before acquiring and learning a second language. It must be highlighted that high levels of cognitive language proficiency are required for successful learning, and as learners move from one level of education to the next, learning becomes increasingly more complex and demanding. Therefore, it might be unfair for such learners to be expected to go through such a learning process using a second language.

The school can hire more teachers who can teach in local languages to assist learners with DLD. Such teachers could assist learners who require additional clarification on lessons or topics discussed in class, as well as those who do not possess a sufficient understanding of the English language. Support teachers can assist in supervising learners' homework in the afternoon for one hour after school before the extracurricular activities and extra classes begin. It might be easier for learners to access learning if they could overcome the language barrier.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate the principals of the schools where this study took place and all the participants for cooperating with us before, during, and after data collection.

Disclosure

There is no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Both authors co-conceptualised the idea for the research, the design and methodology adopted, the analysis of the data and the finalisation of the study results. Ndou N. N. was the lead author.

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Herausforderungen bei dem Lernen in einer Zweitsprache unter südafrikanischen Schülern mit Sprachentwicklungsstörung

Zusammenfassung

Sprache spielt in der Bildung weltweit eine entscheidende Rolle für effektives Lehren und Lernen. Ziel der vorliegenden Studie war es, die Herausforderungen des Lernens in einer Zweitsprache bei Schülern der Sekundarstufe mit Sprachentwicklungsstörungen zu untersuchen. Die Studie zeigt auch Strategien, die von Experten zur Unterstützung der Lernenden eingesetzt werden, sowie die Einstellung der Lernenden zur erhaltenen Unterstützung. Die Studienteilnehmer waren Lernende ($N = 12$), Lehrer ($N = 5$), eine Sprachtherapeutin und ein Schulpsychologe. Es wurde ein qualitativer Forschungsansatz verwendet, bei dem eine Fallstudie als Forschungsdesign eingesetzt wurde. Zu den Quellen der Datengenerierung gehörten nichtteilnehmende Beobachtungen, Interviews und Fokusgruppendifkussionen. Die Daten wurden mittels thematischer Analyse ausgewertet. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass das Lernen in einer Zweitsprache als Unterrichtsmedium für Lernende mit SES eine Herausforderung darstellt. Sie hatten Schwierigkeiten mit Verstehen, Lesen und Worterkennung von Lerninhalten. Die Lehrkräfte gaben an, dass sie Strategien wie Förderunterricht und Bereitstellung von mehr Lesestoff einsetzten, um den Wortschatz und die narrativen Fähigkeiten der Lernenden zu verbessern. Außerdem verwiesen sie die Lernenden an andere Experten zur weiteren Unterstützung. Auch die Beteiligung der Eltern an der Unterstützung von Lernenden wird als fördernd angesehen. Einer der Faktoren, der die Unterstützung von Lernenden einschränkt, ist allerdings ihre Einstellung zur erhaltenen Unterstützung. Diese kann auf das unzureichende Bewusstsein für SES zurückgeführt werden. Daher ist es notwendig, das Bewusstsein der Lernenden für SES zu schärfen. Ein ausführlicher Kurs in Sonderpädagogik in der Ausbildung von Sekundarschullehrern ist erforderlich, um die Lehrkräfte mit Strategien zur Verbesserung des integrativen Unterrichts vertraut zu machen. Die Förderung der lokalen Sprachen als Unterrichtsmedium muss auch in der Sekundarstufe einen hohen Stellenwert haben.

Schlüsselwörter: Sprachentwicklungsstörung, Zweitspracherwerb, Unterrichtsmedium, Lernherausforderungen, Herkunftssprache